



CHAIRS' STEERING

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE

23rd January 2007

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor D Cartwright (Chair) and Councillors Beech, Field, Hill, MacMillan, Shurmer and Smithers.

Non-members:

Councillors Braley and Gandy.

Also present:

Ms A Harwood and Ms D Tulson (Oasis Christian Centre).

Officers:

T Kristunas and C Smith.

Member and Committee Services:

I Westmore.

28. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor Thomas.

29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of any party whip.

30. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

subject to the addition of Councillor Smithers to the list of those present, the minutes of the meetings of the Chairs' Steering Committee held on 14th and 30th November 2007 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

31. COMMUNITY FACILITY – PLYMOUTH ROAD

The Committee considered a proposal from the Oasis Christian Centre for the development of a Community Centre on Plymouth

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Road. The key issue for the Council to consider was the request from the Centre for a contribution to the capital funding for the scheme.

Members received a brief outline of the proposal from two representatives of the Oasis Christian Centre, Ms A Harwood and Ms D Tulson. The representatives from the Oasis Christian Centre stated their desire to create a facility that was suitable for youth related purposes but would also be available as a business conference and training centre, counselling venue and meeting place for other community groups. The Facility was to have a Christian-based ethos and would be run by a management board made up of local members of the church. The mortgage on the Centre, whilst held by the church locally, would be guaranteed by the national church. Despite the Christian ethos, the representatives were clear that the Centre would be available to all members of the local community.

The Committee considered that the aims of the Oasis Christian Centre, to provide a service to the local community were laudable and the members enthusiastic and committed but had significant concerns with a number of aspects of the proposal.

It was felt that insufficient work had been undertaken to establish a convincing business case for the Community Centre at this particular location. The estimates of income to the Community Centre did not appear to be based on closely researched evidence of local need. Members did not consider that the range of services being proposed was adequate to generate the predicted use. Use of the Community Centre appeared to be the only or main source of income to the Centre and Members felt that, given the lack of a business plan, it would be imprudent to commit Council money to the scheme. It would be necessary for the Council to undertake borrowing to allocate funds to this proposal. This was not considered the most sensible course of action for the authority given the questions raised over the financial viability of the scheme.

There were also concerns at the prospect of the Community Centre competing for business with established facilities and at the range of services being proposed. This was particularly felt to be the case in terms of youth facilities. The vicinity the proposed centre, within a central location, was already served by established facilities whereas other parts of the town were lacking any dedicated youth provision.

Given the concerns that had been expressed, Members did not feel able to recommend the proposal to the Executive Committee.

RECOMMENDED that

the Executive Committee is asked to RESOLVE that

for the reasons stated above, the proposal be rejected

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32. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT 2006/07 AND 2007/08

Members received a report setting out the Revised Housing Revenue Account Estimates for 2006/07 and the Initial Estimates for 2007/08.

Officers highlighted a number of amendments made following circulation of the report as set out below:

Paragraph 4.5

Following a recalculation of the rent figures included in the report the figures included in the final sentence of this paragraph should read as follows:

£57.45 should read **£57.22**, and
£54.59 should now read **£54.50**.

Paragraph 5.2

The figures in bold should read **£2.72 on a 52 week basis**.

Paragraph 7.2

£2.96 should read **£2.72** per week on a 52 week basis, and
£3.21 should now read **£2.95** on a 48 week basis.

Officers reported that the Housing Revenue Account was in a relatively healthy position at the present time. Members noted that there had not been the expected fall in expenditure on responsive repairs following an increase in planned maintenance and Officers explained that this appeared to be linked to consistently rising expectation amongst tenants.

There was considerable discussion around contributions from the Housing Revenue Account to fund the capital programme. The Council was currently taking advantage of rules that provided for free borrowing for housing capital expenditure. The level of revenue balances on the Housing Revenue account was around £5M and was set to increase, although it was recognised that the Government could change these subsidy rules at any time which would cause the Council to end this provision. The arrangements ensured that the Housing Revenue Account was in a sustainable position, a view that was supported by the Council's auditors. Members recognised that the present course of action provided the Council with the scope to properly manage a stock transfer if it was considered necessary.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

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33. O&S TRAINING SESSION WITH DAVID MCGRATH – OUTCOMES

Members considered the outcomes of the training session given by David McGrath on the 11th January. A summary of the responses to the session was provided for Members. It was noted that six members of the Committee had been able to attend the session.

At the conclusion of the training session Members had been invited to put forward suggestions as to how scrutiny could be transformed during 2007 and this list was one of the focuses of the discussion.

Given that the training session was considered by the majority of those present to be extremely useful, it was suggested that the facilitator come in to assist the Council on a “consultancy” basis, specifically to assist in the scoping of major reviews that were being planned.

The idea of channelling interested Members towards specific reviews garnered support as it was considered the present system still did not do this sufficiently. This was starting to happen through the use of increasing use of Task and Finish Groups. Greater focus within reviews was also seen as essential in delivering SMART outcomes through the Overview and Scrutiny process.

Further training for Members in Overview and Scrutiny was identified as desirable as there was still the perception in some quarters that the conduct of the Committees had not moved on far enough from the previous old-style Committee system. It was noted that the call-in system did not appear to be operating to any real extent, although it was unclear whether that was to the detriment of the working of the Council. In addition, the use of Executive Advisory Panels was identified as a weakness of the present system and it was suggested that the avoidance of these Panels would be to the benefit of Overview and Scrutiny;

The Chairing of Overview and Scrutiny Committees by minority groups was raised as a possibility in order that the policies of the majority or controlling group on the Council were subjected to an adequate level of holding to account. In a similar vein, it was suggested that the introduction of a single party Executive or Cabinet could advance this development.

RESOLVED that

Officers undertake further research of Overview and Scrutiny structures and methods of operation and provide a further report back to Members in due course.

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34. WORK PROGRAMME

The necessity of receiving the budget and performance monitoring reports was again discussed. Officers commented that a clear audit trail for monitoring by Members of performance and budgetary compliance was regarded as essential at a corporate level.

RESOLVED that

the programme of future work be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 p.m.
and closed at 8.45 p.m.

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CHAIR